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## THE FYLFOT CROSS, OR THORR'S HAMMER.

BY LLEWELLYNN JEWITT, F.S.A.



HAVING in a previous article described one of the more distinctively-curious varieties of the cross—the Tau—in continuation of my series of papers on "The Cross in Nature and in Art"—I now proceed to illustrate another, and even more singular, form, that of the Fylfot.

The "Fylfot cross," or "fytfot" (four-footed), or "Thorr's hammer," or "Gammadion"—"the dissembled cross under the discipline of the secret"—is one of the most singular, most ancient, and most interesting of the whole series of crosses. This curious mystic cross, or symbol, is by some writers said to be composed of four gammas, conjoined in the centre, "which, as numerals, expressed the Holy Trinity, and, by its rectangular form, symbolised the chief corner-stone of the Church." It is also said to be formed of the two words "su" (well), and "asti" (it is), meaning "it is," or "it is well;" equal to "so be it," and implying complete resignation. From this the Swástikas, the opponents of the Brahmins, who denied the immortality of the soul, and affirmed that its existence was finite and connected only with the body upon earth, received their name; their monogrammatic emblem, or symbol, being the mystic cross , formed by the combination of two syllables, *su* + *ti* = *suti*, or *swasti*. The Fylfot may be described, heraldically, as a cross cramponnée, or rebated. In its proper

and legitimate proportion, it is a square divided on each of its four sides into five equal parts; thus being, in all, a square composed of twenty-five squares, as (Fig. 1). It is, therefore, simply a plain Greek cross, or cross of St. George (Fig. 2), composed of nine squares (as already fully explained in

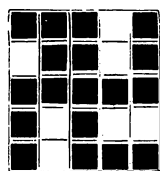


Fig. 1.

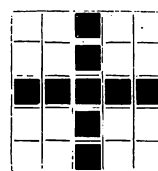


Fig. 2.

my previous articles upon "The Cross in Nature and in Art"), with the ends of the limbs continued in the direction indicated, and occupying seventeen out of the twenty-five squares of the entire space. Or, in other words, simply a plain cross of five squares, within a border of similar squares, from which the fourth on each side is omitted.

The Fylfot is known in Northern mythology as the hammer of Thorr, the Scandinavian god, or Thunderer, and is called "Thorr's hammer," or the "Thunderbolt." The Scandinavian god, Thorr—from whom our fifth day of the week, Thursday, or *Thorr's day*, takes its name—was one of the most celebrated in Northern mythology. He was "the bravest of the sons of



Fig. 3.

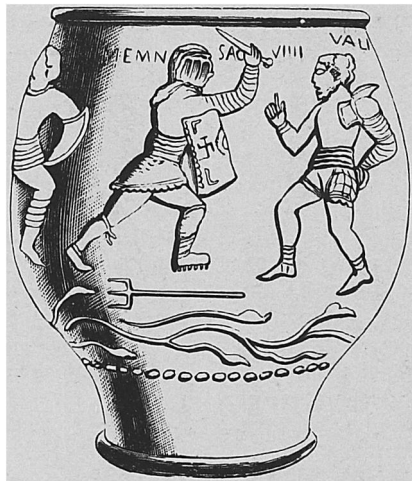


Fig. 4.

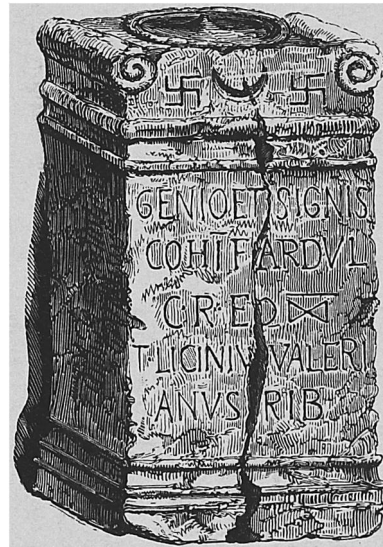


Fig. 5.

Odin," or Woden (to whom Wednesday, or *Wodensday*, was dedicated), and Fria or Friga, the goddess of earth, to whom the sixth day, Friday, or *Frigasday*, was dedicated. He was "believed to be of the most marvellous power and might; yea, and that there were no people throughout the whole world that were not subjected unto him, and did not owe him divine honour and service; that there was no puissance comparable to his. His dominion of all others most farthest extending itself, both in heaven and earth. That in the aire he governed the winds and the cloudes; and being displeased, did cause lightning, thunder, and tempest, with excessive raine, haile, and all ill weather. But being well pleased by the adoration, sacrifice, and service of his suppliants, he then bestowed upon them most faire and seasonable weather; and caused corne abundantly to grow; as all sortes of fruits, &c., and kept away the plague and all other evil and infectious diseases." He was known as the "Thunderer," and the derivation of Thursday is variously

considered to be Thors day or Thunderer's day (*Thunresdæg*, *Thursdæg*, and *Thorsdæg*, Saxon; *Donnerstag*, old Teutonic; *Dandersdagh*, Dutch).

The emblem of the god Thorr, or the Thunderer, was, as I have just said, a thunderbolt or hammer of gold; this, the hammer, being represented as a fylfot. It was with this hammer that he destroyed his enemies the Jotuns, crushed the head of the great Mitgard serpent, killed numbers of giants, and "that he restored the dead goats to life which drew his car, and that he consecrated the pyre of Baldur." His hammer had the peculiar property that whenever thrown it never failed to strike the object at which it was aimed, and it always returned back to Thorr's hand. This latter property will be recognised as similar to that of the boomerang; and here, I think, we have a curious insight into the origin of the form of the emblem itself. I have remarked that the fylfot is sometimes described as being formed of four gammas conjoined in the centre. When

the form of the boomerang—a missile instrument of barbaric nations, much the shape of a letter **V**, with a rounded instead of acute bottom, which, on being thrown, slowly ascends in the air, whirling round and round till it reaches a considerable height, and then returns until it finally sweeps over the head of the thrower and strikes the ground behind him—is taken into consideration, and the traditional returning power of the hammer is remembered in connection with it, the fylfot may surely be not inappropriately described as a figure composed of four boomerangs, conjoined in the centre . This form of fylfot is not uncommon in early examples, and even on a very ancient

specimen of Chinese porcelain,\* it occurs at the angles of the pattern, thus—. It is the ordinary fylfot, with the angles curved or rounded.

Thorr is described in many of the old poems and legends of the North as doing wonders with his hammer. In one he is described as having lost his hammer, and consequently his power; and the way in which, by stratagem, he regained it, is very curious. This old Danish poem is called "Thorr of Asgard," and is, says De Prior, remarkable as being the only one in which an Edda poem has been preserved whole and sound in the memory of the peasantry; it is also the oldest preserved in



Fig. 6.

Sweden. The translation of the poem by Dr. Prior opens thus :—

"There rode the mighty of Asgard, Thor,  
His journey across the plain;  
And there his hammer of gold he lost,  
And sought so long in vain.

"'Twas then the mighty of Asgard, Thor,  
His brother his bidding told—  
'Up thou and off to the Northland Fell,  
And seek my hammer of gold.'

"He spake, and Loki, the serving-man,  
His feathers upon him drew;  
And launching over the salty sea,  
Away to the Northland flew,"

where he stopped and "greeted the hideous Thusser king," to whom he delivered his message that—

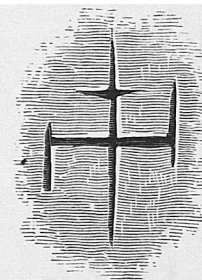


Fig. 7.

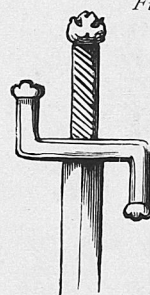


Fig. 8.



Fig. 9.



Fig. 10.

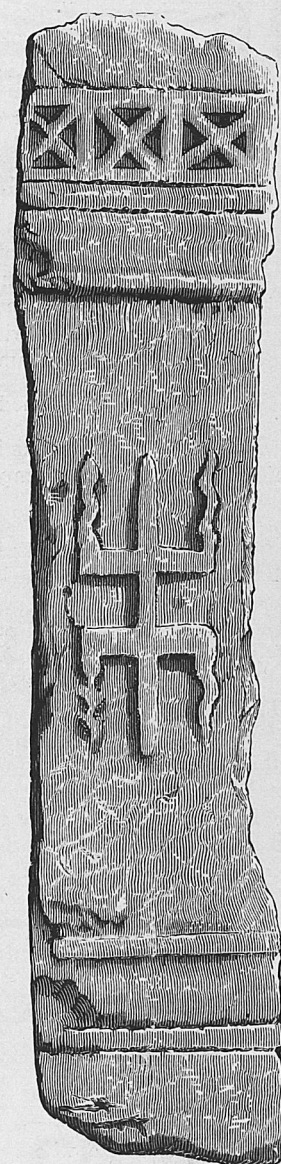


Fig. 11.

"Thor has his golden hammer miss'd,  
And therefore am I come here."

The Thusser king replies to the effect that Thor will never again see his hammer until he gives him "the maiden Fredenborg" to wife. Loki departs with the message, which he delivers to Thor, much to his and the maiden's disgust. Thor therefore disguises himself in a maiden's dress, and goes with his attendants to the Thusser king, and is presented to him as his future

\* It is worthy of remark, while alluding to porcelain, that one of the old workmen's marks occasionally found on Worcester china of the early period of its history, is the fylfot cross. It is, however, of course not known to what workman it belonged, or why it was adopted by him.



bride. The king thereupon, after being astonished at the ravenous appetite of the maiden, ordered the hammer to be brought:—

"Then brought eight champions, stout and strong,  
The hammer upon a tree,  
And heaved it up for the youthful bride,  
And laid it across her knee;"

when Thor threw off his disguise, grasped the hammer, slew the king and his people, and returned home with his regained hammer. The "Thusser" is supposed to be the Turks. By the loss and recovery of the hammer, the emblem of power, may be figured the temporary subjection of the *Asæ* and their retalia-

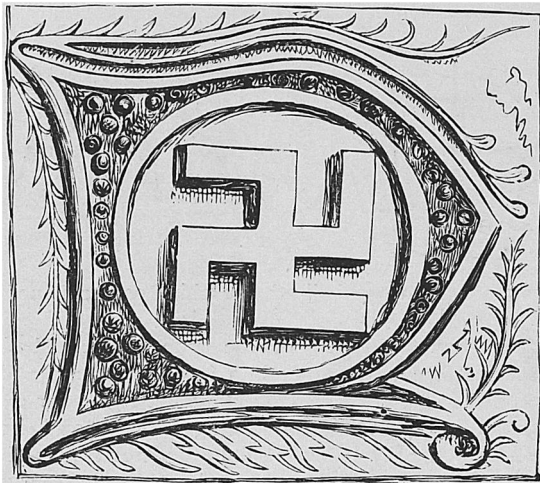


Fig. 12.

tion. But a more mystical interpretation of it has been suggested—namely, that the hammer is the emblem of thunder, which is lost during the winter months, but by the aid of "Loki"—*flame, heat*—is again recovered from the genii of cold and darkness, habiting in the North, at the return of spring. This same story is well told in prose by Miss Goddard in her "Wonderful Stories from Northern Lands"—Thrym being the king of the Thursi, and the lady, Freyia, the beautiful wife of Oder. The hammer, it should be mentioned, was named "*Mjölnir*," or "the crusher"—a very appropriate and significant name, if we are to believe a tithe of the stories told of the deeds accomplished by its agency. In the same volume the fair authoress has given excellent versions of other Thor stories—his adventures

among the Jotuns, the legend of his wife Sif's golden hair, the cauldron for the Jötun Ager, &c. But Thor stories are not the theme of my present chapter, and therefore need only briefly alluding to while speaking of the properties and form of the wonderful hammer of that more than wonderful god.

Snorro Sturleson, in the "*Heimskringla* (Saga iv.), when describing the sacrifice at Lade at which King Hakon, the foster-son of Æthelstan, was present, thus writes: "Now, when the first full goblet was filled, Earl Sigurd spoke some words over it, and blessed it in Odin's name, and drank to the king out of the horn; and the king then took it, and made the sign of the cross over it. Then said Kaare of Greyting, 'What

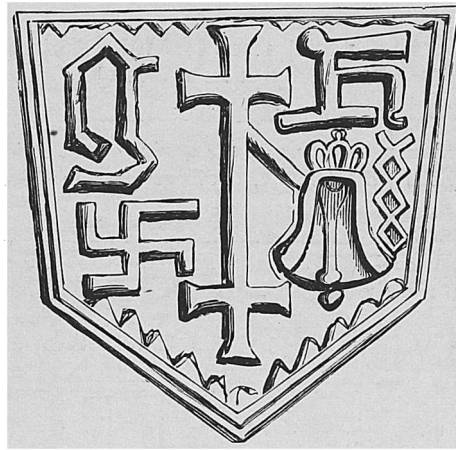


Fig. 13.

does the king mean by doing so? will he not sacrifice?' But Earl Sigurd replied, 'The king is doing what all of you do who trust in your power and strength; for he is blessing the full goblet in the name of Thor, by making the sign of his hammer over it before he drinks it.' According to Longfellow, King Olaf, while keeping his Christmas at Drontheim—

"O'er his drinking-horn the sign  
He made of the Cross Divine,  
As he drank and muttered his prayers;  
But the Berserks evermore  
Made the sign of the Hammer of Thor  
Over theirs."

Olaf's sign being the simple cross, while that of the Berserks was the fylfot.



Fig. 14.

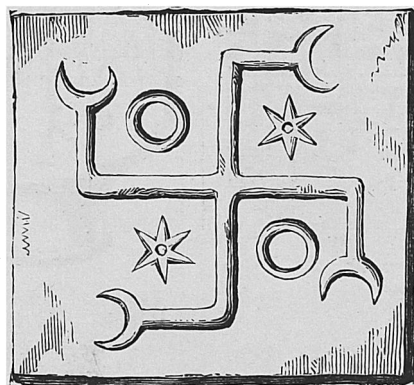


Fig. 15.

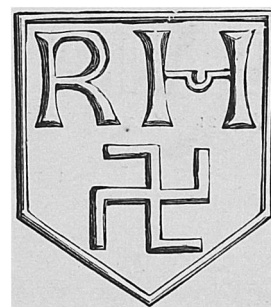


Fig. 16.

The fylfot appears on Scandinavian, Danish, and Gaulish coins (Fig. 17), as well as those of Syracuse, Corinth, and Chalcædon. Among some gold ornaments and coins of Danish origin, found at Bornholm, in Fyen, were coins "impressed with a four-footed horned beast girthed, and mounted by a monstrous human head, intended, in a barbarous fashion, to represent the rider. In front of the head was the sign of Thor's hammer." Some of the coins also bore the name of Thor in runes. It also appears on Etruscan, Roman, and other



Fig. 17.

pottery; on paintings in the catacombs of Rome; and on Roman sculptures. One remarkable example upon Roman pottery, as connected with our own country, is the famous Colchester vase (Fig. 4), on one side of which is represented a scene between two gladiators—a *secutor* and a *retiarius*. The former, armed with a close helmet, an oblong shield, and a sword, is advancing upon his conquered adversary and prepared to strike the fatal blow, while the latter, who has been vanquished, has dropped his trident, and is elevating his right hand to implore the mercy of the spectators. On the shield of the *secutor* appears the

fyfot cross; probably borne there as the emblem of asserted power and victory.

On the various sculptured stones from the Roman wall, so admirably figured by Dr. Bruce in his priceless work on that subject, is a small Roman altar found at Birdoswald, dedicated by the Dacian cohort to Jupiter, on which the fyfot forms the central ornament, and has a plain cross in a circle on either side (Fig. 3). Another remarkable instance is presented on a fine Roman altar (Fig. 6), dedicated to Minerva, from the station of Bremenium (High Rochester). It bears at the head a plain cross saltire within a circle, between two fyfots, and is inscribed—

DEAE MI-  
NERVAE ET  
GENIO COL-  
LEG[I] L. CÆCIL[IVS]  
OPTATVS TRIB[VNVS]  
V. S. L. M.

("To the goddess Minerva and the genius of the college, Lucius Cæcilius Optatus, the tribune, dedicates this in discharge of a

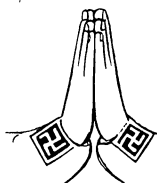


Fig. 18.

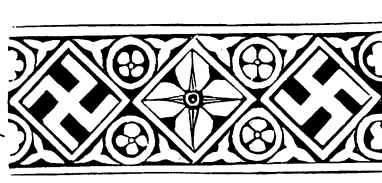


Fig. 19.



Fig. 20.

vow.") There can be no doubt that this altar belongs to the time of Elagabalus, who reigned from 219 to 222.

Another altar, bearing the same ornament as the former, viz. a cross within a circle, between two fyfots, is also preserved at Alnwick Castle (Fig. 5). It was found at Bremenium, and bears the inscription—

GENIO ET SIGNIS  
COH[ORTIS] I. F[IDÆ] VARDVL[LORVM]  
C[IVIVM] R[OMANORVM] EQ[VITATÆ] M[ILLIARIÆ]  
T[ITVS] LICINIUS VALERI-  
ANVS [T]RIB[VNVS]

("To the genius and standards of the first cohort the faithful of the Varduli Roman citizens cavalry, a thousand strong, Titus Licinius Valerianus, tribune [erected this].")

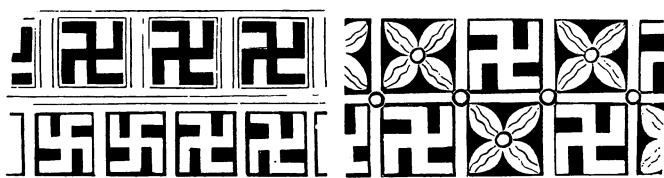


Fig. 21 and 22.

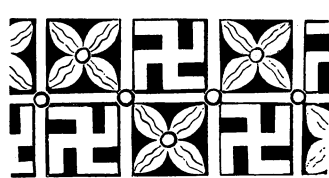


Fig. 23.

The thunderbolt of Jove, represented in a variety of ways, and the wheel of Nemesis, the emblem of swift retributive justice, are found occasionally represented on Roman sculptures, and probably with the same general meaning as that of the fyfot—the thunderer's hammer. Fig. 11 exhibits Jove's thunderbolt as carved on one side of a fine altar (the wheel of Nemesis being on the other), from the Walton House station of the Roman wall. It also occurs on a Roman vase (Fig. 10). The figure will be easily recognised as bearing a marked resemblance in some of its details to the fyfot; but this is even more strikingly shown in the adjoining figure (Fig. 7), which is incised upon an altar to Fortune, from the Risingham station, where it occurs on the top of the left-hand volute. The same general idea, in this instance indicating or asserting power and victory, is shown on the sword hilt (Fig. 8).

The fyfot cross has been much used in our own country from the time of the Romans, or, earlier still, from the Norsemen, to our own times. It is met with on a shield (Fig. 9) on the

Bayeux tapestry, and is not unfrequent on monumental brasses and effigies of ecclesiastics, military, and laymen. On the brass of Thomas de Hop (*circa* 1300), a priest, in Kemsing Church, Kent, it forms a border on the collar of the chasuble (Fig. 23) alternately with quatrefoils; on the brass of Richard de Hakebourne (*c.* 1315) in the chapel of Merton College, Oxford, it occurs on the border of the collar and sleeves; on the collar of the chasuble of Walter Frilends (*c.* 1370) at Oakham Church, Surrey (Fig. 21); in the same position, and also singly on each sleeve, of John Alderburne, Lewknor Church, Oxfordshire (Figs. 18 and 22); of John de Grofhurst (Fig. 19); and on those of Bishop Branscomb, Sir John D'Abernoun, and others. It was probably adopted by Christians through its "consisting of four gammas, which as numerals expressed the Holy Trinity, and by

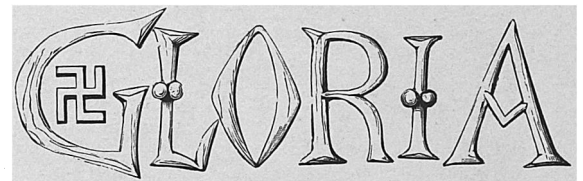


Fig. 24.

its rectangular form symbolised the chief corner-stone of the Church."

The fyfot was a favourite device upon mediæval bells, and enters somewhat conspicuously into founders' marks and other devices found in Derbyshire, Leicestershire, and other churches in the Midland district. As the ringing of bells was believed to drive away thunder, probably the old thunderer superstition was the reason of this device being used. Barnaby Googe says:—

"If that the thunder chaunce to rore and stormie tempest shake,  
A wonder is it for to see the wretches how they quake;  
Howe that no fayth at all they have, nor trust in anything;  
The clarke doth all the bells forthwith at once in steeple ring  
With wond'rous sound and deeper farre than he was wont before,  
Till in the loftie heavens darke the thunder bray no more.  
For in these christned bells they thinke doth lie much powre and might  
As able is the tempest great and storme to vanquish quight.  
I sawe my self at Numburg once, a towne in Toring coast,  
A bell that with this title bolde herself did proudly boast:  
My name I Mary called am, with sound I put to flight  
The thunder crackes and hurtful stormes, and every wicked spright;  
Such things whenas these belles can do, no wonder certainlie  
It is if that the Papistes to there tolling alwayes flie,  
When haile or any raging storme or tempest come in sight,  
Or thunder boltes or lightning fierce that every place doth smight."

In various churchwardens' accounts items of payments are to be found for "ringinge the hallowed belle in grete tempestes and lightnings;" for "ringing in the thundering;" for the ringers' refreshments for "ringeing att the tyme of gret thunder," and the like. The engravings (Figs. 12 to 16, and 24) will convey a tolerable idea of the prevalence and of the variety of ways in which the fyfot occurs on bells.

Fig. 13 is the founder's mark, I apprehend, of George Heathcote, and it bears in the centre of the shield a double cross-patée with a fyfot cross on one side and a bell on the other. The next example bears the fyfot within an initial letter, and on Figs. 14 and 16 it appears simply in connection with the founder's initials, G H for Godfrey, and R H for Ralph, Heathcote. The next (Fig. 15) has a peculiarly mystic appearance. Each of its limbs is terminated with a crescent, while in the four quarters are respectively two stars and two circles.

On Fig. 24 the fyfot is enclosed in the initial G of the word Gloria, in the inscription "Gloria in excelsis Deo," from the great doxology or angelical hymn. In this instance it may be regarded as the usual commencement of inscriptions, documents, &c., of a solemn asseveration of the truth of what is to follow.

The fyfot, it will have been seen from the very brief and somewhat desultory notes which I have here thrown together, is an emblem, or symbol, of no little interest; and its constant use through so many ages, and by so many and such varied peoples, gives it an importance which is peculiarly striking. Its form might with advantage be adopted in many varieties of ornamentation, and it might occasionally be introduced with good effect in Art-manufacture.